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TITLE: Death becomes an excuse to savage 'elites' – now that's nasty

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The extraordinary reaction to Steve Irwin's death suggests he occupied a special place in the Australian psyche. But it's not the one his eulogisers imagine. It's hard to see how Irwin's approach to wildlife can help to foster respect for the natural environment and its animal inhabitants when the latter are treated as a spectacle for public amusement.

The contrast with David Attenborough, who approaches creatures with an attitude of respect verging on reverence, is striking. Always as unobtrusive as possible, Attenborough communicates a quiet sense of wonder that makes viewers feel humble.

If we can imagine Attenborough making a documentary titled *Ocean's Deadliest*, Irwin's last project, he would have kept a respectful and prudent distance from every creature he encountered, deadly or otherwise.

With Irwin's high-octane clowning the creatures became stage props for gee-whizzery. It's the difference between an old-fashioned zoo, like the one Irwin owned, where the animals are poked, prodded and laughed at, and a wildlife reserve in which animals blend with their natural environment and humans are kept at a distance.

Irwin created a new genre of documentary called "nature nasty" which rejects attempts to portray animals in their natural environment going about their usual activities. Instead, it goes in search of the most dangerous, poisonous and bizarre and provokes animals into extreme behaviour.

It's hard to see how presenting a sort of freak show can cultivate a conservation ethic; indeed, it promotes an oddly 19th-century view of an alien world of dangerous beasts, one that, when I was a boy, led red-blooded Australians to believe that swerving to run over a snake on the side of the road was a public duty.

Irwin's death provided a trigger for a gratuitous outpouring of hatred directed at the "elites" who found his antics embarrassing, especially when they were represented as authentically Australian. In the present political climate every event is turned by right-wing cultural warriors into an excuse to attack the imagined enemies of John Howard.

But, if we are honest, the vitriolic attacks on Irwin's real and imagined critics are rooted in guilt. Whenever Irwin provoked a croc to open its jaws and lunge we were all excited by the prospect that the beast would get him, just as we watch car races anticipating a

crash. The filmmakers understand that it is the frisson of danger that makes these shows popular. The close call is the money shot and any real injury would be replayed over and over.

Now Irwin has met the grisly end that excited us, we feel responsible.

In this turmoil of guilt and grief, what a relief it was to find a real target for bitterness in the form of Germaine Greer, whose only mistake was poor timing. Along with a thousand letter writers, the author John Birmingham went into a frenzy of abuse in a newspaper article, calling Greer a bitchslapping, "poorly sketched caricature of a harridan", "an unwashed and wretched bag lady" and a "feral hag". Oh, and worst of all, "childless".

Infected by Irwin's enthusiasm, Birmingham seriously compared his death to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, suggesting he now sits on a cloud with the late president and Princess Di.

It makes one wonder what our country has come to when an accomplished author can compare a slapstick TV celebrity to one of America's greatest presidents. It's the new face of the cultural cringe - we canonise anybody who makes it in the US or Britain no matter how lowbrow the performer.

For years the owners of Irwin's TV programs, which were highly successful in the US, would not show them in Australia because they believed Australians would ridicule him and turn off in droves. They were right then, but Australia has changed.

Although his antics would have taught few of his fans a conservation ethic, Irwin was generous in using the wealth he accumulated for private conservation purposes. And for all of his popularity he apparently was not struck by the star virus.

Irwin's brand of conservation is one that conservative governments feel comfortable with. His emphasis on individual responsibility takes the pressure off government. And no powerful interests are threatened by it. Only public ignorance, solved by watching Irwin's TV programs, stands in the way of saving the animals.

This is why Howard has been so full of praise for his work. The Irwin circus distracts us from the otherwise conspicuous failures of environmental policy over the past decade.

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